Indigenous Histories of Tuberculosis in Manitoba

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Introduction

This is the “Indigenous Histories of Tuberculosis in Manitoba” newsletter. It is a newsletter that reports research related to the history of tuberculosis (TB) in Manitoba, and it is part of the “Indigenous Histories of Tuberculosis in Manitoba 1930-1970” project, led by University of Winnipeg historian Dr. Mary Jane Logan McCallum. It is for anyone who wants to know about historical research on tuberculosis in Manitoba. The goals of the newsletter are to make people aware of the project, to share information gathered as part of the project, and to encourage discussion about Indigenous history in Manitoba.

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Indigenous Histories of Tuberculosis in Manitoba, 1930-1970
A Brief Overview

There are two fields of subject matter in this study: the management of the disease of tuberculosis and the experiences of First Nations people with the disease.

The project is guided by the following questions:

1) What was the nature of “case finding” (efforts to locate individuals with tuberculosis) in First Nations communities?
2) What were the processes and procedures by which First Nations tuberculosis patients went to TB hospitals in Manitoba?
3) How did segregated TB hospitals for First Nations patients operate?
4) What was the nature of TB treatment for First Nations people?
5) What programs of education and rehabilitation operated in the TB hospitals and how did they work?

Knowledge about these questions will be gathered in two main ways. Research of archival and material sources related to the First Nations history of tuberculosis will be undertaken. Also, life histories of First Nations people who had TB and spent time in sanatoria in Manitoba, their descendants and employees of the sanatoria will be gathered, analyzed and preserved.
Tuberculosis is an infectious disease contracted by inhalation, which often attacks different parts of the body, commonly the neck glands and the lungs. It is characterized by fatigue, coughing and weight loss. Tuberculosis is a complicated disease that is very difficult to treat effectively and can recur under certain conditions. From the late-nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century tuberculosis became a major public health concern in Canada and elsewhere, and many more First Nations, Inuit and Métis people than non-Aboriginal people had active, serious and deadly cases of the disease. This led to the widespread assumption that people of Indigenous ancestry were racially or biologically susceptible to the disease. Rather, dislocation, poverty, malnutrition, overcrowding and inadequate housing contributed to its high incidence, and these were conditions experienced by large segments of the First Nations and Métis populations in Manitoba. These circumstances are directly influenced by the conditions of colonization including repressive economic, political, cultural and social policies, military invasions, dispossession and white settlement and the loss of resources from the land, including the bison.

Until 1940, very few resources were committed to providing services for First Nations people with tuberculosis. The federal government, which is responsible for First Nations health, largely ignored the issue, while provincial sanatoria in the West did not tend to admit Aboriginal people for treatment. But in the 1930s, medical professionals increasingly warned of the “menace” First Nations people with tuberculosis posed to public health in the province. The Sanatorium Board of Manitoba, a voluntary organization, committed to a relationship with the federal Indian Health Service to manage a segregated program of surveying, institutionalization and rehabilitation for First Nations people in Manitoba and north-western Ontario and Inuit from parts of the Central Arctic. Between 1940 and 1965, thousands of Indigenous people were treated for tuberculosis in three sanatoria in Manitoba dedicated primarily to the treatment of “Indian TB,” Dynevor Indian Hospital, Clearwater Lake Indian Hospital and Brandon Sanatorium.
What will the research do and where will it go?

This project seeks to document and reclaim part of an enduring Indigenous past and to uncover and explain the experiences of Indigenous people with respect to TB so that they are not forgotten. It has been shown that understanding and connecting with our past is an important aspect of First Nations’ sense of health and wellness.

This research may be translated into a book and or articles that explore the history in more detail and make the research accessible to anyone who is interested in it. In addition, the research will be presented to academic and professional audiences where possible.

This research can also inform First Nations Health policy and systems in Manitoba in a way that contributes to self-determination, community control and capacity building. Fundamentally, this project aligns with efforts to eradicate TB. The records researched in this project contain data that can link health policy to health outcomes in ways that can provide insight for the development of future policy. Moreover, the records could also contain vital information that can help in understanding the socio-economic determinants of health, especially in the context of TB.

Third, this research project is part of a larger effort to engage in a broad public and professional discussion about the histories of health policy, institutions, practices and ideologies that shape the health of Manitobans. It will be suited to the education of health and other professionals invested in learning about the historical conditions of Indigenous health in Manitoba.
Examining the Archives

Two main sources of written information about the First Nations history of tuberculosis in Manitoba are the records of the federal Departments of Indian Affairs and National Health and Welfare (now Health Canada) and the records of the Sanatorium Board of Manitoba. Band, church, provincial, municipal, museum and other collections will also be consulted.

These records discuss how tuberculosis hospitals were run by the federal government and the Sanatorium Board of Manitoba, including the day-to-day operations of the hospitals: construction, maintenance, repair and purchase of the physical facilities, furniture and equipment; human resources; purchasing and preparing food; medical treatments; and social and educational programming and rehabilitation of patients.

Some people may wonder why it is important to examine records that were written by non-First Nations people in order to understand First Nations history. While written records tend to contain information that is non-First Nations in origin, they can be read for the voices of First Nations people – historians call this reading “against the grain.” In addition, written records kept by those who managed the system can contain important information about the past that can be obtained through no other means than archival research. This includes the methods and approaches of institutions and descriptions of the care given to First Nations people. The treatment of First Nations and their experiences in the hospitals is a matter of civic concern and public policy. It is thus vitally important that historical records be accessible to ethical and First Nations-supported programs of research seeking to uncover this past.

The information contained within archives was produced by institutions operating without the consent of First Nations people. As a result, it is all the more important that research on tuberculosis history follows ethical procedures, including not only university, provincial and national guidelines for ethical research, but also First Nations ethics. In practice, our procedures include the separation of identifying information, the secure storage of research materials, consultation before publication and the dissemination of knowledge gathered in the project with First Nations involved.

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Photo: Library and Archives Canada e010900431
Introducing the Principal Investigator

My name is Mary Jane McCallum. I grew up north of Barrie, Ontario and am a member of the Munsee Delaware Nation near London. I moved to Manitoba from Ontario in 2001 to undertake a Ph D in History at the University of Manitoba. My academic training focused on Indigenous health, education and labour history, women’s history and the history of race and colonization in Canada – areas where I continue to teach and conduct research. I finished my Ph D in 2008 and I am now an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg. For list of my work, see: https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/index/history-mccallum

Did you or a family member spend time in a sanatorium in Manitoba being treated for tuberculosis between 1930 and 1970?

Did you work at a tuberculosis sanatorium in Manitoba between 1930 and 1970?

Would you like to be interviewed about your experiences?

If so, please contact Dr. Mary Jane Logan McCallum, at M.McCallum@uwinnipeg.ca.

Thank you for reading this newsletter. Please contact me if you have any feedback at M.McCallum@uwinnipeg.ca.

In The Next Issue: Meet research assistants Mary Horodyski and Felicia Sinclair and learn about their work at the archives!